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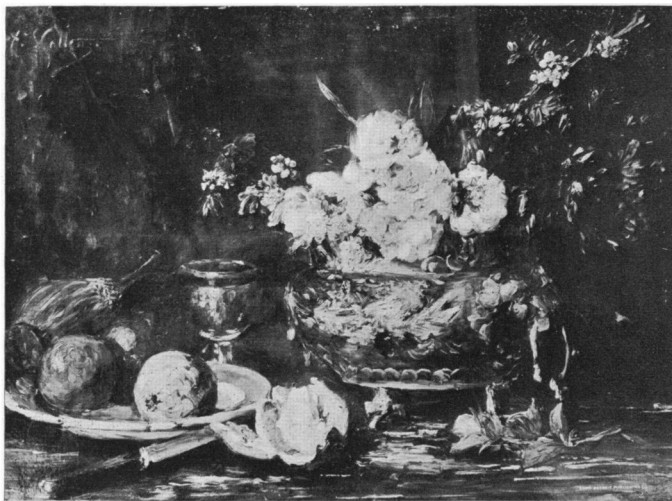
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# ART AND PROGRESS

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FRUIT AND FLOWERS

ANTOINE VOLLON

THE DETROIT MUSEUM OF ART

## FLOWER PAINTERS

### AND WHAT THE FLOWER OFFERS TO ART

BY MARIA OAKLEY DEWING

IT is for the painter to discover what his subject has peculiarly to offer to Art. Only from this point of view can it be important, and what it has to offer must be in the language of art and not of literature.

The flower offers a removed beauty that exists only for beauty, more abstract than it can be in the human being, even more exquisite. One may begin with the human figure at the logical and realistic, but in painting the flower one must even begin at the exquisite and distinguished. Let not the student think that flower painting is the business of the amateur.

There have been so few great flower painters that one easily recalls them, and here we mean to speak only of the most conspicuous. I am sure that the name of

La Farge comes first into the mind of every American who has seen those flowers that no one has ever surpassed. It was the period of bitumen, a rich and fascinating delusion. What is a period? From the too prodigal, splendid feast of nature the painter of original mind timidly chooses a plum, and straightway all the little men boldly pick out a plum, and behold a period! It is the prevailing thought rather than the method that marks a period, and that method of bitumen expressed a thought of the rich color of the old masters; but La Farge painted so solidly those wonderful canvases that they were a refutation of all the apprehensive words spoken of bitumen.

La Farge never painted flowers out of doors, yet his studio water lilies in a bowl



WREATH

JOHN LA FARGE

or on a black lacquered tray have in them all the suggestion of the lily on the water in the most poetic surroundings. One feels that all flowers yielded their most intimate beauty and expression, told a secret to this wizard hidden from every other painter. Not even Vollon, never Fantin-Latour painted a flower that was so much a flower as these early marvels of La Farge. They

were painted with undertone and glazings, with a very varied palette, the most colored white that any one ever attained, and black that had all the subtlety of the Japanese. The Japanese influenced La Farge more than the French, but indeed he strode over the whole field of art, boldly adapting whatever he felt to be his own, till it was a wonder that one who so used

others could be at the same time so undeniably original. It was with an absolute originality that his flowers were painted, both in conception and technique, but most of all with an incisive knowledge of in what it was that a flower differed from a tree or a face or a beautiful piece of stuff.

group of green leaves brought down on the inner side of the wreath with sharp hard outlines, with broad flat surfaces of color, with opaque thick texture, accents the fragility of the flowers. This is to demonstrate the difference between mere representation and the art of picture-making, but



STUDY IN FLOWERS

THE TATE GALLERY

FANTIN-LATOIR

Never did he more exemplify this than in the painting of a small wreath of many kinds of flowers, bound in a rich classical form, casting its little shadow on a greyish white background. The forms of the petals are distinct one on the other, sometimes with little change of value or color, distinguished by texture. Here the tone is pallid with a luminous pallor, here it is magnificently brilliant with rich clear tints, here dark and mysterious and illusive. A

most of all to loudly acclaim what flowers have to offer as a subject to art.

Whether the subject is this wreath, roses in a bowl, or white lilies against a white curtain, first of all they are flowers, and the beauty of the handicraft so great that in the face of La Farge's ambitious mural decorations, his subtle and imaginative figure pictures, these little flower pieces remain not only the most beautiful in all the world, but the most perfect achievement of

all his work. They stand among the great things of the world.

That La Farge was more influenced by the Japanese than by any other art must be taken in an almost intangible sense. His method was not theirs, and his background was as essentially a part of his picture as his flower, as inalienable in intellectual conception as in visible harmony. The Japanese at most give a simple tone as background to their objects. The Japanese paintings are to our Western sense hardly pictures, but studies, or conventional decorations, abstractions so elegant that we must go to the best of the Western art to match them in this attribute. La Farge did match them, but not with their own methods.

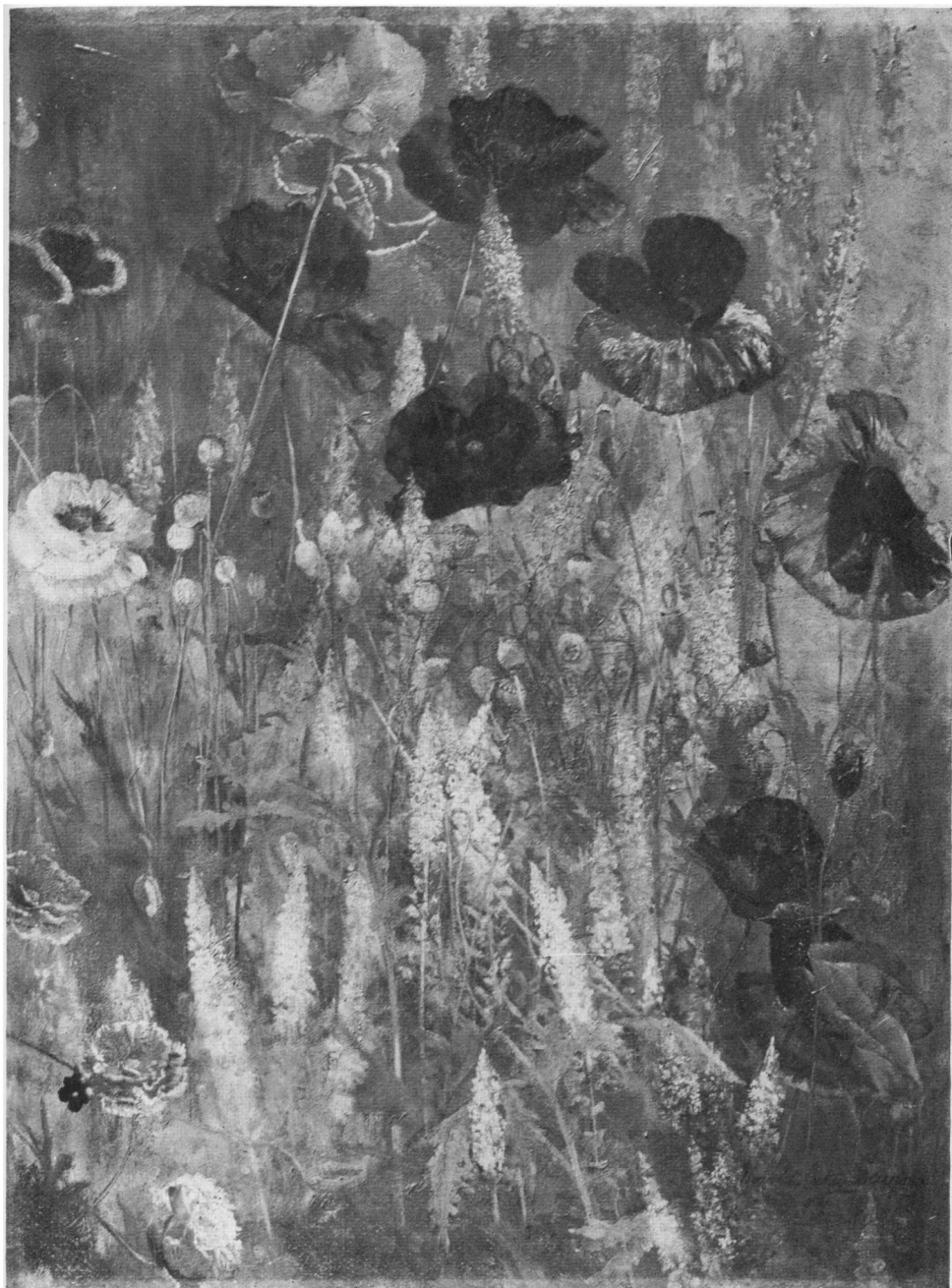
A poetic painter like Sotatsu was able within these Japanese limitations to express whatever he pleased. As often as any flower painting, there comes up in my mind a silver screen by Sotatsu in the collection of Mr. Freer. The subject chosen is the red field lily. This little treasure would deserve immortality if only for the truth of color, for the drawing miraculously close to nature, but I find myself accepting these achievements unconsciously, and what I am thinking of is the effect of the red lily stretching far away into a landscape that is not represented there in any visible sense, but again and again the red spot of the lily, exceedingly perfect in its silhouette, diminishing in size in the distance, subtly fainter in color, telling like a repeated note in music. Often in the garden I have seen this wonder of repetition, but I have never seen it painted like this.

How differently the great Vollon, so famous for his still life, but to me first of all for his flower painting, sees his subject. Truly art, like heaven, "has many mansions." If the poetry of Vollon is of a less occult nature than that of La Farge, it is none the less compelling, and withal, its robust and confident mastery makes a deep appeal to the imagination. Vollon saw his flowers with an extreme directness, but he approached them with the enthusiasm of a lover. Like La Farge, he distinguished them from other objects, knew their fragile grace, their peculiar texture—more than anything their texture—their individual texture. To him the manner of their

growth was of vital importance. It was so that *this* flower was balanced on its stem, it was this way that the other one clung and climbed. One does not forget that he knew this even when he gathered a charming motley group into a little bouquet.

Never shall I forget my first Vollon in my early youth: Two red roses in a Dutch gin bottle. A bottle squarely made, tapering off to the base, high-shouldered and small of mouth. In color a delightful olive darkening to black in the shadows, with yellow half lights and blue high lights and brilliant lighter green transparencies. The solid spherical roses balanced and swung on their firm, slender stems and the vigorous green leaves stretched out towards the spectator, offering for his pleasure their beautiful surfaces and their sharply defined outline.

And now I come to speak of a man held high by his countrymen and by the world. Exquisite painter of portraits, painter of anything, a master of his craft, considered in France as their best painter of flowers, and whose *chef d'œuvre* in flower painting is treasured by the National Academy in London—one must judge a man by his best. To have attained even in one canvas perfection is to be a great painter, and in using the work of Fantin-Latour to illustrate my point, I must begin by saying that the National Gallery acquired the masterpiece they so prize, since I was last in Europe. I have never seen it. I know Fantin-Latour's flowers by a large room full of them, said to be very representative, some few years ago shown in New York. To find a match for these paintings in transparency and brilliancy one must go to Monticelli, who makes flowers of his little figures. The bold and skillful handling, the conviction with which these flowers are painted is not to be disputed. The master is declared on every canvas, and yet to my thinking all of that could have been given in the painting of drapery. As I moved from canvas to canvas, I felt increasingly that the flowers lent themselves to explain the extraordinary facility of the painter, not that like Vollon and La Farge and Sotatsu the skill of the painter lent itself to explain the immense claim on art that flowers make as a subject.



POPPIES AND MIGNONETTE

COLLECTION OF CHARLES L. FREER

MARIA OAKEY DEWING

You see we are now discussing the painting of flowers, not altogether painting in the abstract. We are not even questioning

Fantin-Latour's right to use flowers to explain another subject. If Vermeer chose to call one of his famous masterpieces "The

Music Lesson," which represented an interior to which the figures are complimentary, supplementary as one might say, that is his legitimate right. His subject is hardly translatable into words. It is atmosphere, light, the wonderful bathing

the light embraces and floods, the way the light touches the brass nails and sharp edges of the chair, and the silver tray on the table in a charming "staccato"—why! All this is Vermeer's subject, and the different and more uncompromising man-



THE MUSIC LESSON

VERMEER

with light and atmosphere of the objects it reveals and obscures. The rendering of light upon the wall is poetry of a lofty nature—the form of the little jug on the table, of the violoncello on the floor, of the spinnet—that miracle of a spinnet—lend themselves to show the play of the light. The great masses of shadow that the light forces upon parts of the heavy tablecloth as contrasted with the exposed parts that

ner in which these inanimate objects receive the light, as compared with the way the less obviously rounded or flattened or convex surfaces and complex forms and textures of the quaint woman, quaintly gowned, who stands at the spinnet, responds to it, is also his subject. Into this subject come the five small masses of light—touched white, forming a group of spots made by the jug on the table, the collar





PANELS FROM A SCREEN BY SOTATSU. THE FREER COLLECTION. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

and sleeves of the music master, and the left sleeve of the woman. And this group of white spots is repeated lower down in the canvas in the tessalated pavement, larger and whiter in the foreground, diminishing in size and intensity (like the lilies of Sotatsu) as they stretch back, leading the eye to the

sunlight on the wall. They help to give the depth and recession of the interior, as groups of light flowers might lead the eye to the depth and distance of the garden so played on by the light. Light and the forms translated by it—that is what Vermeer was painting, and it seems a pity



that he never painted a flower garden, for I think it would have been as far as that is possible, the last word in that direction, like Whistler's painting of the night. Vermeer differed so from other Dutchmen that had he painted flowers he never would have been classified with the very distinctive school of Dutch flower painters.

It is not my purpose here to speak of these painters separately, for collectively they represent to me one very beautiful, interesting, and enormously to be admired achievement, but it is an achievement in the technique of painting, in the art of decoration, in surface, in drawing, in a marvel of complexity and finish of detail, but it is not an achievement in explaining what the flower offers to art.

The Dutch flower paintings are still life indeed, and every object the same surface, whether it be a tulip, a rose, a dewdrop, a butterfly or a drapery background. The flowers are as hard and still as a cut jewel, or as gold and brass of exquisite workmanship. They are grouped with no idea of truth to nature. The tulip (and what extraordinarily beautiful creations these Dutch tulips are) placed in a bouquet with a passion flower—the hot-house and the spring garden mixed—but what superb color, and how the Dutch flower painter knows that evasive quality we call "style."

It is upon the soil of what is already in the mind that the new impression grows, and it is the impression turned to conviction that produces the masterpiece. If one would realize the powerful appeal that flowers make to art let them bind themselves to a long apprenticeship in a garden. Who, without long acquaintance, can tell the color of a bed of auratum lilies? The long buds, with no calyx, growing right out of the stalk, faintly tinged with the same green, designed with an elegance fit for sculpture, merely clinging together, the long petals form the bud. Presently one stirs, a rift in the smooth form. Soon all the petals, gently stirring, make a little trumpet mouth at the end of the bud. One by one they burst loose, a puff of fragrance escapes, each petal curls back against the stem, the splendid stamens float out, the round ended polished pale green pistil shows itself and the golden band that every petal bears. One such flower would be a prize in a garden,

but the lilies are opulent in their display. They crowd on the tall stem, and the slender dark leaf makes a fine setting for their magnificence. It is a surprise to see a petal detach itself and fall silently to the ground. I remember the flight of a tiny sharp shinned hawk, who lighted on the railing of my piazza. He was there, he was gone, silently as he came, like the flight of a soul that had no substance and displaced no air. So falls the lily petal to the ground.

Couture used to say, "three looks at your model and one at your work." We are so used to seeing and looking at the human figure that it is easy to see if our drawing represents the normal, and if the figure painter were as incorrect as the usual landscape or flower painter we should condemn him, or at least a few years ago those who believed that art was based on truth would. Plato said that "Beauty was the splendor of Truth," and as when Plato said anything it was hard to improve upon it those words remain an inspiration and suggestion for the one who may be able to show us what has not as yet been done.

It is only the amateur who expects success. It is not possible to succeed. The mastery of one's means is technique, and this can be attained, but the exhaustive expression of the inexhaustible suggestion of nature can never be attained. Yet we may form a sort of grammar of standards by which we may judge the coherency with which the language of art is spoken. I know no other way of judging a picture than by three rules or qualities—the originality of the conception based on the possibilities of *that* subject, the sense of beauty, the technical achievement.

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The Art Commission of the City of Pittsburgh created in 1911, is endeavoring to arouse more general interest in improving and beautifying the city by the use of illustrated stereopticon lectures on Civic Art and kindred subjects. These, under the auspices of the Commission, have been given during the past season in the public schools, clubs, churches, community centre gatherings and other public meetings in Pittsburgh as well as its suburbs and neighboring towns.